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ABSTRACT

A conceptual framework for adult development is proposed, based on a synthesis of the literature on role theory and various age-related adult developmental theories. It is proposed that adult development may not be as linear, uniform, and age-related as has been suggested. An individual adult could be in varying developmental stages across the life roles. The four life roles can be described as relationship with self, relationship with work, relationship with others, and relationship with family. A life role is partially defined by the societal expectations of appropriate role behaviors. Specific behaviors and tasks can be identified as characteristics of each stage of the cycle of each life role. The developmental stages of a life role cycle are initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation. Any individual adult redefines the life role by modifying self-perceptions and expectations for appropriate role behavior. It is concluded that a conceptual framework that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of adult life while at the same time offering a systematic method for assessment would assist educators and student service providers in designing and planning programs, instruction, and curricula to meet the needs of adult learners as well as those of the institution. (SW)

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Life Roles: A Multifaceted Approach to Adult Development

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INTRODUCTION

For years psychologists have discussed developmental stages as they relate to children. It was assumed that once people reached early adulthood, the basic aspects of personality remained stable. However, as adults have been studied more closely in recent years, people have begun to observe rather dramatic changes in their development. In the past ten to fifteen years, theorists have adapted their thinking, recognizing how much adult personality can change.

One of the first theorists to acknowledge the continual development of adults was Eric Erikson (1950). Using the dichotomous concepts of intimacy and isolation; generativity and stagnation; and integrity and despair, he noted that certain complex themes must be considered when examining adult development. Other authors have also addressed adult development as a dichotomous process. Chickering (1969) noted that learning tasks in adulthood often presents the need for integration as well as differentiation. Gould (1978) characterized developmental tasks in adulthood as a time for obligation as well as opportunity.

More recently, other theorists have suggested that adult development focuses around certain life stages (Knowles, 1979; Levinson, 1978). The main theme of these writers has been that during certain periods of an adult's life he or she must confront a common stream of tasks or activities. Levinson (1978) viewed human development in four broad stages, three of which encompassed

adulthood. Each of these four stages overlap and contain a brief transitional period. Kohlberg (1973) has suggested that cultural influences can effect and modify adult personality and that people may experience typical or similar personality changes. He further hypothesized that by attaching age ranges to certain stages of development, one can draw conclusions across a representative sample of adults. Gould (1978) discussed the notion that there may be common problems that adults face. Many times these problems are related to age and adults tend to approach them in a characteristic fashion during specific age periods. Vaillant (1977) saw adult life cycles as developmental stages in which each stage had to be completed in a particular order or sequence.

A book about adult development which has had popular acclaim was written by Gail Sheehy in 1976. While her stages had titles such as "trying twenties," and "Catch-30", they essentially defined adulthood in ten year periods. In investigating these periods, she identified common tasks, activities, and responsibilities that must be addressed by adults. Many of the tasks described are common aspects of adult life with which most people must contend. However, she linked them with to uniform age categories to give them a developmental perspective.

Knox (1977) has written extensively about adult development and has reviewed much of the literature and research done in this area. He viewed adulthood as encompassing three stages: early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. According to Knox, the concerns, interests, and responsibilities of adults shift

as they move from one stage to another. Early adulthood consists of activities connected to the worker role and includes such tasks as beginning jobs, changing work roles, and leaving jobs to undertake new positions. The tasks and responsibilities of middle adulthood focus on family roles including raising children, watching children grow and leave home, and adapting to a new relationship with one's spouse and children. During this period the attention of adults shifts away from work and towards a concern for home and family responsibilities. During late adulthood, people experience a shift from the home back to work. This may include a more realistic assessment of one's goals and accomplishments, preparation for retirement, and adjusting to health problems or limited physical activity.

Knox, like many others, saw adults as developing in a somewhat fixed manner and at relatively fixed times (i.e., chronological ages). He acknowledged that passing from one stage to another is a significant transition. Because of the stress and tension associated with these transitions, adults are forced to develop new skills and abilities. While these developmental periods are much longer and less observable for adults than for children, they can nonetheless produce similar dramatic changes (Knox, 1977).

In summary, common to all the theories of adult development is the notion that adulthood should no longer be viewed as a stagnate, unchanging time and that development occurs in age-related stages. Also, many of the theorists mentioned identify particular tasks and responsibilities that can be associated with the stages of adult

development.

As several of the adult development theorists have attempted to delineate guidelines to explain the development of adults, some aspects may have been overlooked. The generalizing nature of these guidelines does not allow for the acknowledgement of the individual differences among adults. Furthermore, the broad age categories may not accurately describe the lives of adults as indicated by societal trends. Changing family roles, an increase in the number of adults participating in formalized learning experiences, job re-training needs, and the greater number of women seeking careers outside the home are examples of shifts in society that necessitate further investigation into the development of adults. In trying to make some useful generalizations, an awareness of the complexity of the individual and his or her relationships with others may have been neglected.

Nevertheless, this omission has been indirectly noted by several authors writing in the field of role theory as it relates to adults. Borgatta noted as early as 1969 that individual differences in both personality and social roles have been recognized for a long time, but the idea had not been empirically developed into a comprehensive role theory. Borgatta defined roles as the rights and duties that arise from an informal social concensus regarding appropriate role behavior. These rights and duties, which are transformed into expectations by others and accepted by the person, can vary within the context or situation. Knox (1977) also noted the importance of various adult roles and

discussed the idea that roles change throughout adulthood. Furthermore, self-concept and one's attitude toward others is reflected in the roles one assumes. As changes in roles occur, learning and adjustment must happen in order to assume the new roles or manifestations of an old role or roles.

Psychologists, sociologists, and others working in the field of human growth and development have begun to recognize that adulthood is a period of much change. Theorists have proposed various hypotheses to explain or predict the changes that can occur in adults' lives as they develop. Age-related developmental theories explain adult growth in terms of the tasks and behaviors that are undertaken by most adults during particular age ranges. Role theory atempts to explain the behavior of adults in a social environment in terms of the rights and duties associated with particular roles that are defined by informal social concensus. An examination and synthesis of these explanations of adult development may provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of individual adults and adults in general than age-related adult development theories alone.

DISCUSSION:

A common theme of the developmental theories is that adults mature in a regular manner at roughly fixed times that are related to age. In an effort to build a new concept of adult development that incorporates the varied facets of adulthood, it may be necessary to expand the traditional concept of adult developmental

stages. While there is a general concensus that certain trends are common in their occurrence among age groups, the age categories may be somewhat restrictive. We propose that adulthood is a dynamic, interactional process that encompasses several aspects of adults' lives, and that these aspects can simultaneously be in varying developmental stages. This approach to adulthood offers a conceptual framework that builds on the conclusions of age-related developmental theorists. And, at the same time this method expands the current view of adult development that by its tendency to overgeneralize limits its practical and theoretical usefulness.

In developing an alternative conceptual framework, it is useful to define some fundamental terms. There are three general terms for this schema of adult development. The first is LIFE ROLES which refers to one's relationships with others, relationship with family, relationship with self, and relationship with work or career (Illustration 1). The second is CYCLES which refers to the developmental aspect of life roles (Illustration 1). And, the third is TRIGGERING EVENTS (Knox, 1977) which are dramatic changes in adults' lives that propel them into new learning experiences to adapt to changes in life roles or the taking on of a new life role (Table 1).

A life role is defined as a general sphere in an adult's life which is characterized by certain behaviors and tasks. It exists and is relevant only to the extent that it is oriented towards another role or roles within a particular context. As mentioned previously, four general life roles can be identified. The

majority of adults participate in most or all of these life roles at sometime in their lives. These life roles are each prefaced by the phrase "Relationship with.." to connote the interaction between the adult in this role and others in the contextual environment.

The first life role to be discussed is the "Relationship with Self" which is the development of a self-concept, a value system, and a sense of self-worth or esteem. This is a process that includes the internal aspect of a person as well as the personal effects of interactions with the external environment. "Relationship with Work," the second life role, refers to the interactions between the person and the tasks and behaviors associated with the role of "worker." The third life role, "Relationship with Others" can be divided into two more specfic roles: community member and friendships. Again, as with the other life roles, it is a dynamic interaction between the person and his or her role expectations as well as the role expectations of the contextual situation that defines the life role. Finally, the fourth life role is "Relationship with Family" which encompasses the specific roles of parent and spouse or partner.

These four major life roles are termed such because they represent general roles that adults assume. For example, it is possible to identify specific roles such as the role of supervisor, teacher, or secretary within the general life role of "Relationship with Work." But, these specific roles will not be discussed in relation to the conceptual framework since its focus is on general developmental principles rather than specific role behaviors.

Although only four major life roles have been discussed, there can be other general roles depending on the individual person and her or his particular life situation. For example, an adult who is participating in formalized education of some sort would be involved with a fifth life role - "Relationship with Education."

Each life role consists of four stages in a cycle: initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation. A cycle is characterized by growth and change, and reflects adults' socialization to the life roles which are characterized by the assumption of the particular behaviors and tasks associated with the role (Table 2). The first stage, initiation, is a period of engagement in and individualized learning of the tasks and behaviors of a life role. Adaptation, the second stage of a life role cycle, is the period in which the person assimilates and adjusts to the expectations and requirements of the role. The individualized modification and readjustment of the expected tasks and behaviors of the life role characterize the third stage which is termed reassessment. The final stage, reconciliation, is a time of reflection on all aspects of the life role and lessening involvement with it.

Any adult can be placed in a different stage of a cycle for any one of the four life roles depending on the behaviors and expectations involved. Thus, each person could be in several different stages of a developmental cycle across a range of life roles (Illustration 2). For example, adults who are becoming established in their careers would be in the adaptation stage of

that life role; yet, as new parents, they would be classified in the initiation stage of the life role of "Relationships with Family" (i.e., parent).

Triggering events have been defined by Knox (1977) as dramatic changes in adults' lives. According to this concept of adult development, triggering events can cause adults to exit a life role. A re-cycling effect in which the adult would return to a previous stage of a cycle can also be initiated due to triggering events. Such would be the case of people who remarry after a divorce or the death of a spouse. They would then begin anew the life role of "Relationship with Family" (i.e., partner). However, although they would return to the beginning of the cycle upon remarriage, they would typically progress through the cycle at a faster rate because of previous experience with the life role. Another example of a triggering event is when employees leave a job voluntarily or involuntarily and decide to return to formal education. They would be exiting the life role of "Relationship with Work" and engaging in a new life role - "Relationship with Education."

By viewing life roles as separate aspects of adults' lives, each of which undergoes a separate cycle, it is possible to account for the diversity and complexity in any one individual's life. The underlying assumption of current developmental theories is that people will undertake the tasks and behaviors in all the areas of their life - family, work, self-development, etc. - at roughly the same time. However, by synthesizing adult developmental theory and

role theory, one can see that any individual person might assume the tasks and behaviors of each life role during different periods of life. And, each of these life roles has a developmental process of its own.

IMPLICATIONS:

The use of a multifaceted approach in examining adult development has social and educational implications for practitioners. This approach emphasizes the individuality and complexity of each person while at the same time posing issues for retention, adult learning needs, and student services programs. Demographic and technological changes in American society indicate that educational institutions will likely be faced with increasing numbers of adult students. The ramifications of these trends must be considered when developing short and long range student services programs aimed at student development and retention. Also, an increased number of adults in the classroom with unique learning needs will have an effect on curriculum considerations and instructional approaches. An understanding of the developmental process of adults, a consideration of this process in relation to the goals of the educational institution, and a recognition of the needs of students must be integrated into institutional planning for increased effectiveness. This argument has also been advanced by Knefelkamp (1980) who has stressed the importance of addressing the social and intellectual needs of students.

A life role has a developmental cycle of its own; however, the development occurs in conjunction with other life roles.

Therefore, a two level effect can occur when adults assume a new life role or make changes in an existing one. The first is a repercussive effect in which the behaviors, expectations, and/or perceptions of the new or changed life role cause an adjustment modification in the adult's other life roles. This in turn can affect the original role, leading to repercussions again on the other roles, etc. The second level is a substantive effect in which the new behaviors cause a response shift in other life roles. In other words, the engagement in a new life role or undertaking change in an existing life role can cause such a significant modification of the adult's self-perceptions and expectations so as to result in a substantial change in the adult's self-perceptions and behaviors in other life roles. One or both of these responses may occur when the adult, in assuming a new life role or dealing with change in an existing one, experiences one or both of the following: 1) dissonance between self-perceptions and expectations of the life roles (in terms of attitude-behavior inconsistencies) or; 2) a need to modify other life roles to accommodate the demands of the new or changed one. The dissonance resulting from an inability to integrate the new self-perceptions and expectations with the demands of the other life roles can result in the adult student exiting the newly assumed or changed life role. The planning and design of support programs whose goals are to assist students in recognizing areas of possible role dissonance may help to alleviate adult students' attrition from the institution.

As adults enter new life roles or make changes in existing

ones, it is possible for them to learn the elements of successful role adjustment from effective behavior developed in other life roles. In this way, they can utilize past experiences and achievements to cope with the uncertainties and possible problems that may arise when assuming new life roles or initiating changes in existing ones. Behavior patterns which have led to career, family, friendship, etc. achievements and successes can be identified and used as a resource in adapting to a new or changed role. Using this schema of adult development, student services personnel can help students in identifying these behavior patterns and thereby offer constructive techniques for maximizing their success in the new or changed role.

Analyzing adult learners according to a multi-role perspective has several other implications for educators. Authors such as Knowles (1979) and Knox (1977) have discussed the importance of adults' readiness to learn in enhancing their abilities to learn. Chickering (1980) has encouraged educators to integrate theory on adult development with practice to enhance the personal growth of students. In turn, this will assist the students in addressing the significant problems that society now faces. By having a conceptual framework with which to more accurately assess adult development from an individualized perspective, learning readiness can be specifically pinpointed. Hence, learning activities directed towards the appropriate need level can be identified. For example, Knowles (1979) has proposed the use of contract learning as an effective method for encouraging learning by adults. This

method, because of its individualized approach, is particularly relevant considering the wide diversity among adults due to the variability of their life role development.

The varying levels of cognitive complexity of learners has been discussed by Knox (1977) and Hunt and Sullivan (1974). In short, they suggest that people have differing cognitive styles which allow them to learn better in individually designed learning ennvironments. Knox also cites several items which may have a significant effect on adult learners' abilities to comprehend, process, and retain information; such as social values, personal interests, and perceived role expectations. Even the simple mechanics of the classroom can have an effect on learners. The availability of library materials, support provided by the adult learner's family, conflicts with work, and the financing of coursework can all hinder the adult learner's willingness to learn and persevere. Also, adults often seek learning activities based on vocational and career needs or deficiences. Graham (1983) has outlined the importance of occupational status and career related needs on adult educational participation.

Knowles (1979) has discussed the differences between pedagogy; teacher directed instruction, and andragogy; student directed instruction. The differences include aspects such as the self-concept and perceptions of learners, the role of experience and readiness to learn, and an orientation to learning. Assessing adult development according to life roles may help educators to develop learning activites that are more systematically matched to

the learner's needs and abilities. Additionally, by utilizing the resevoir of experience existing in many adult learners, the content and illustration of classroom material can not only be enhanced, it can also provide the foundation for new learning and allow for new meaning being given to abstact ideas.

As mentioned earlier, dramatic changes in adults' lives, such as the engagement in a new life role, often propel them into some form of learning to adapt to the change. This implies that the impetus for undertaking formalized learning experiences may be to learn problem-solving skills and to cultivate a more integrative view of self and world. Thus, any individual may approach a learning situation with a dual purpose: first, to enhance problem-solving skills; and secondly, to learn skills to adapt to a developing life role. However, the behaviors and expectations of all the life roles are still contained in one person who is exposed to broader issues and may need a broader perspective to deal with these issues. At the same time, the person may have needs of a more limited nature in response to needs arising from the demands of a newly engaged life role. For example, adults who are working full time but taking classes in the evening to expand future career opportunities might have an extensive experiential base but possibly a more limited knowledge base. Therefore, they would have need for a broader perspective in instruction to integrate their experiences with the newly acquired knowledge. This type of example illustrates the need for consideration of the complexity of the adult development process when designing or adapting curricula

to meet the needs of these learners while still transmitting the knowledge and skills deemed appropriate for the educated person.

Assessment of adults in a multidimensional manner can enable professionals in the field to more accurately evaluate development. It may be assumed that because an individual is highly mature in regards to work, family, or community involvment, he or she may be equally sophisticated in other aspects of life. This may not necessarily be the case and therefore sensitivity to the variance in life role development is important for those working with adult students to enhance their learning potential. This in turn would likely increase adults' self-confidence and feelings of efficacy in a new life role and lead to greater likelihood that they would persevere in their educational endeavors.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:

The conceptual framework of adult development proposed in this has not yet been empirically tested or validated. Rather, the impetus for continued investigation and scrutiny into its possible veracity as an alternative schema to explain adult development has been supported by informal conversations with practitioners and researchers in the field of adult development and learning, as well as with adults themselves. It would be possible to empirically test several aspects of the conceptual framework. The first would be the assessment of the tasks and responsibilities in relation to their validity in the particular stages of a cycle. It has been supposed that each life role has its own developmental cycle.

Table 2 represents an attempt to correspond tasks already identified by developmental theorists (Knowles, 1979; McCoy, 1977) and additional ones generated by the authors to the stages of the life roles. Once the tasks for the stages have been ascertained, their correspondance to specific life roles and a comparision between life roles can be made which would help to validate or invalidate this supposition.

The second aspect of this schema, the societal expectations of appropriate role behavior and the individual modification of these expectations relative to life roles, needs to be empirically examined. Investigations into the extent to which perceptions of self in the life role mediates with external expectations would help to further define the parameters of life roles. Also, the identification of life roles that many, but not all, adults may assume such as "Relationship with Education" would broaden the schema thereby rendering it more comprehensive and useful for practitioners.

The relationship between triggering events, decision-making, and actual initiation of changes in a life role or engagement in a new life roles is a third aspect of the schema that needs to be investigated. Clarification of this relationship might help educational planners and providers to more accurately anticipate the needs of the adult student as well as develop programs, courses, and delivery systems that might attract adult students to their institution.

SUMMARY

A conceptual framework for adult development that recognizes the multifaceted nature of adult life has several implications for practitioners and educators. The schema presented in this paper attempts to conceptualize adult development from an integrative, holistic, and individualized perspective. A synthesis of the literature on adult development and role theory has indicated that the development of adults may not be as linear, uniform, and age-related as has been suggested. Rather, adults may be engaged in general life roles that progress through their own developmental cycles. Therefore, an individual adult could be in varying developmental stages across the life roles. The development of the life roles would depend on several criteria. First, a life role is partially defined by the expectations of appropriate role behaviors that is arrived at by informal social concensus. Secondly, specific behaviors and tasks can be identified as characteristic of each stage of the cycle of each life role. And finally, any individual adult re-defines the life role by mediating his or her self-perceptions and expectations for appropriate role behavior with those defined externally by informal social concensus.

Changes in American society have necessitated closer scrutiny of the applicability and validity of current theories of adult development. Educational institutions are anticipating an increase in the number of adult students undertaking formalized learning experiences. A conceptual framework that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of adult life while at the same time offering a systematic method for assessment would assist educators

and student services providers in designing and planning programs, instruction, and curricula to meet the needs of adult learners as well as those of the institution.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF A LIFE ROLE CYCLE

INITIATION
ADAPTATION
REASSESSMENT
RECONCILIATION

LIFE ROLES

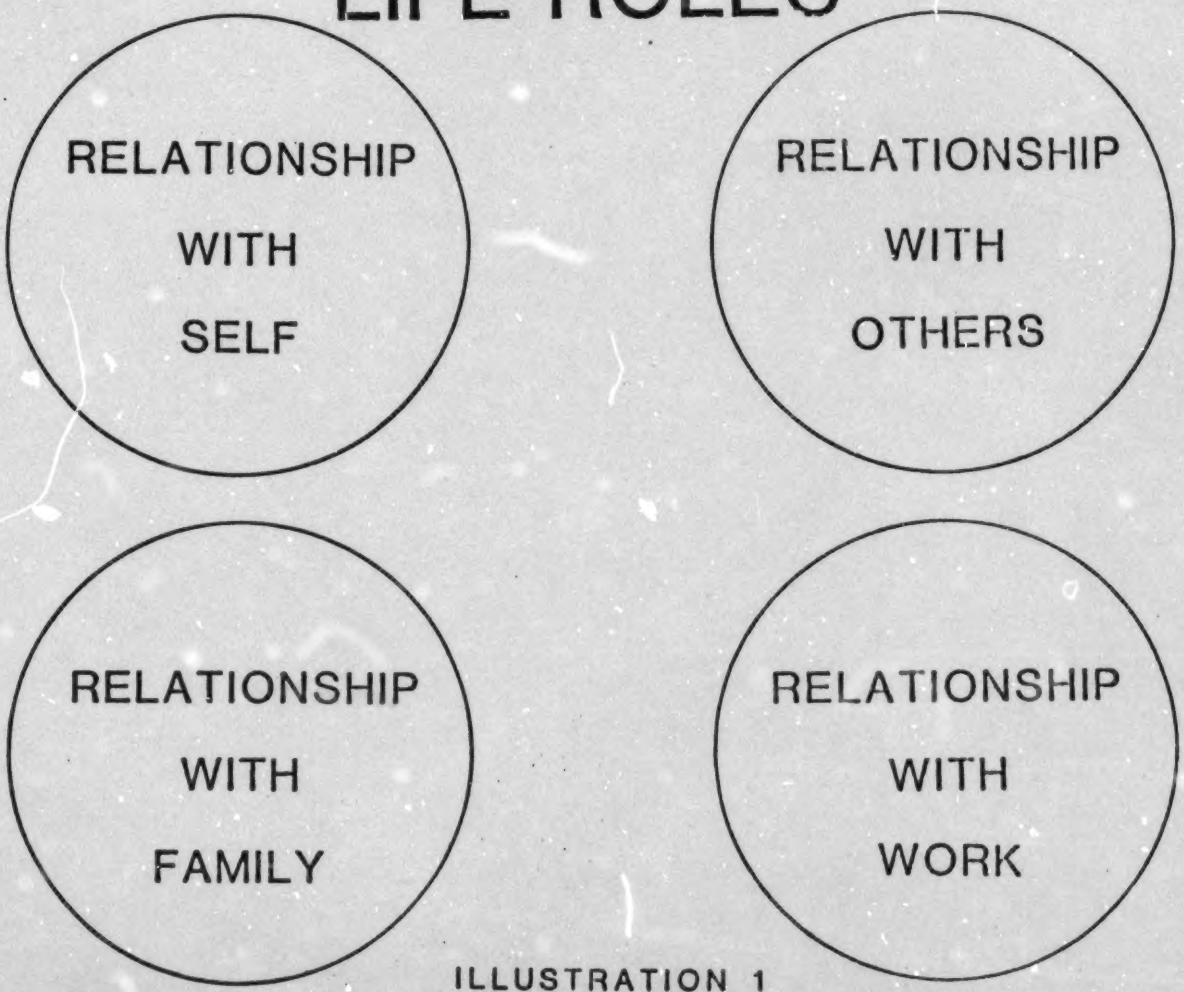

ILLUSTRATION 1

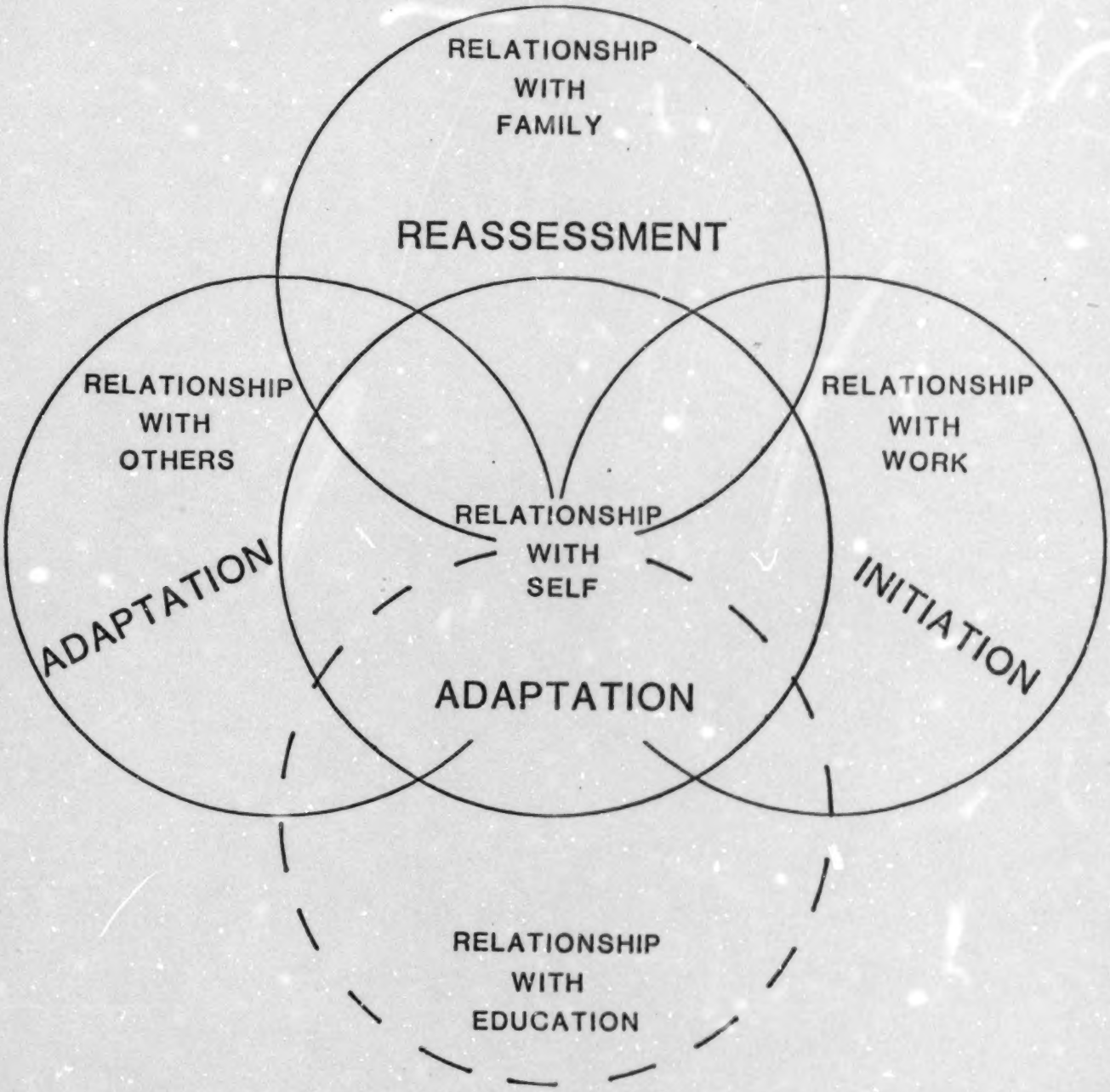

ILLUSTRATION 2

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF TRIGGERING EVENTS

LIFE ROLE	TRIGGERING EVENT
Relationship with Work:	-Obtaining a job -Change in existing job -Advancement or promotion -Transfer to a new job -Voluntary or involuntary unemployment -Retirement -Job change
Relationship with Family:	-Establishing a permanent living arrangement with partner -Pregnancy or birth -Child(ren) beginning school -Child(ren) leaving home -Divorce or separation -Illness, injury, death of family member
Relationship with Others:	-Moving to a new location -Joining community, social, religious, political organizations -Discovering new leisure, cultural, social interests
Relationship with Self:	-Includes triggering events in all other Life Roles

From: Knox, A.B. Adult Development and Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1977.

TABLE 2

Developmental Stages of a Cycle	LIFE ROLE OF "Relationship with Self"	LIFE ROLE OF "Relationship with Work"	LIFE ROLE OF "Relationship with Education"
INITIATION	--developing a sense of self-identity --discovering and improving abilities --beginning to make decisions and solve problems	--learning job search skills and exploring career/job options --choosing and entering career/job --becoming socialized to the work environment	--entering post-secondary education in some form/seeking courses to satisfy personal needs --defining the relationship between learning experiences and personal/career goals --questioning abilities as student
ADAPTATION	--developing emotional flexibility --clarifying values and priorities --searching for personal understanding of others	--working for advancement --adjusting to economic and technological changes in the workplace --accepting individual differences in co-workers and feeling part of the work environment	--adjusting to classroom environment --meeting others with similar goals and concerns --accepting self as capable learner
REASSESSMENT	--developing a realistic time frame for life goals and re-examining values --discovering a broader and more diverse self-concept --achieving greater self-confidence and self-acceptance	--maintaining interest in job --adjusting to the realities of work --serving as mentor (facilitating the development of a less experienced co-worker)	--expanding intellectual interests and gaining greater self-confidence in learning abilities --crystalizing personal/career goals --establishing a network with others having similar concerns, interests, and experiences
RECONCILIATION	--searching for meaning in life and gaining a broader perspective of humanity --adjusting to physical limitations and concerns for health --maintaining mental stimulation, curiosity, and morale	--disengaging from paid work --preparing for retirement --searching for alternative outlets	--evaluating and integrating learning with other aspects of and experiences --disengaging/succeeding in educational endeavors --accepting personal responsibility for future learning

Adapted from: Knowles, M. The adult learner: A Neglected Species, 2nd Ed. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1979.
McCoy, V.R. Adult life cycle tasks/Adult continuing education program response. Kansas City: Adult Life Resource Center, Division of Continuing Education, University of Kansas, 1977.

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Developmental Stages of a Cycle	LIFE ROLE OF "Relationship With Others"		LIFE ROLE OF "Relationship With Family"	
	Friend	Community Member	Partner	Parent
INITIATION	--establishing friendships --developing common leisure, recreational, cultural interests with friends	--learning about community resources --joining community, civic, political organizations	--selecting a partner --preparing for a committed relationship or marriage	--planning a family --preparing for children --adjusting to pregnancy
ADAPTATION	--initiating new friendships and maintaining established ones --balancing friendships, work, and personal life --sharing family concerns with friends	--taking action in community activities --assuming more social responsibilities --taking leadership roles	--adjusting to relationship or marriage --relating to partner as individual --making joint financial and home management decisions	--raising young child(ren) --developing understanding of children --negotiating parental styles with partner
REASSESSMENT	--deepening friendships --developing greater acceptance of friends as individuals	--working for the welfare of others and society --achieving community recognition	--deepening relationship and developing greater intimacy with partner --sharing new commitments and interests --accepting partner as individual	--adjusting to grown children --accepting grown children as individuals
RECONCILIATION	--sharing reminiscences with long-term friends --establishing family-like ties with friends	--maintaining organizational ties --benefiting from community connections	--adjusting to a more time to spend with partner --adjusting to single state	--becoming a grandparent --becoming more dependent on child(ren)

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